The real Climategate scandal? Misinformation

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Body

The long-awaited release of the Russel Panel Report in the United Kingdom should finally put to rest the scientific controversies surrounding the so-called Climategate scandal, in which leaked emails from a renowned climate research group at East Anglia led some to question the credibility of global warming science.

The Russel Report's conclusions are clear: there was no evidence of scientific malpractice and no reason to doubt the credibility of the scientific claims being made by the East Anglia researchers. Four previous reviews of the Climategate scandal (two in each of the U.K. and United States) came to the same general conclusion, although the Russel Review was the most comprehensive and definitive.

The Russel Report findings will not sit well with most climate change skeptics. After all, Climategate has become the number one cause célèbre, the principal rallying cry, the "Exhibit A" put forth by skeptics in their ongoing efforts to discredit the scientific case for anthropogenic global warming.

The ranks of scientific skeptics have, in fact, dwindled considerably in recent years. The cumulative evidence for anthropogenic global warming is now so broad, diverse and compelling that 98 per cent of 1,200 climate scientists recently surveyed believe in it.

Yet, climate skepticism will continue to persist and will no doubt remain at the forefront of public and political debates on climate change. To understand why, is to understand the real scandal of Climategate.

To the sober observer - the practising scientist - the content of the leaked East Anglia emails appeared little more than the off-hand remarks of colleagues who, like the rest of us, sometimes get frustrated. They were hardly evidence of a scientific conspiracy, and certainly did not warrant the outpouring of baseless, hostile accusations that followed.

When Climategate first broke, in fact, the editors of the pre-eminent science journal Nature commented that these supposedly explosive revelations would be laughable were it not for their political consequences. Like many, the editors recognized that the real scandal had little to do with the science, but everything to do with its political ramifications.

Specifically, large swaths of the public and many opinion leaders continue to doubt the reality of climate change. The reasons for this are complicated, but a major factor is that uncertainties regarding the status of climate science have been systematically exaggerated, and controversies over the credibility of climate science have been intentionally contrived. The perpetrators of this misinformation about climate science include diverse individuals and organizations, although most share either an ideological resistance to government regulations or have vested economic interests in carbon-intensive industries.

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What we are witnessing , according to Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway, authors of Merchants of Doubt, and James Hoggan and Richard Littlemore, authors of Climate Cover-Up: The Crusade to Deny Global Warming, is a similar but more ambitious replay of the tobacco industries' campaign to sew doubt about the scientific consensus on the health risks of smoking. In both cases, the supposed "skeptics" of the science have understood that politicians are reluctant to propose new regulations where the public is uncertain about the need for such regulations.

Like Watergate, the real scandal of Climategate was not likely to be found in the communications of those who had their emails illegally hacked (or in the case of Watergate, their phones illegally tapped). Rather, the real scandal can be found by looking to those who were behind the hacking (or wire-tapping), in the first place, and to those who have been so eager to butcher the truth and assault the professional reputations of respected scientists for short-term political gain.

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